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ABSTRACT

This paper examines distance education at one community college, providing data on the strengths and weaknesses of distance learning and the effectiveness of various delivery methods. Part 1 offers an account of one student's concerns about a distance education course focusing on logic and computers. The student was enrolled in an electronics program leading to an associate's degree at the time he registered for his first distance education class. Part 2 analyzes this student's distance education experience, highlighting specific problems: (1) lack of feedback from the teacher, with the student not necessarily understanding or properly benefiting from the instructor's e-mailed explanation; (2) difficulty structuring time, completing homework assignments with the regularity necessary to turn in an average of two assignments every week; and (3) excessive workload of homework assignments. The study asserts that individuals who construct distance education courses need to consider how to best use the medium's advantages. A good syllabus for a face-to-face class does not automatically translate into a good syllabus for a distance education class. Without adequate guidance or effective delivery of material, students must teach themselves the subject without knowing if they are on the right track. (AS)

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Distance Education Practices at One Community College

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Distance Education Practices at One Community College

Distance education today is controversial. It arouses great enthusiasm among the administration and the converse among faculty. As distance education becomes increasingly available, more data become evident about the strengths and weaknesses of this method of education. This data helps administrators and educators assess the usefulness of distance education.

This paper attempts to provide further data on distance education. It is divided into two parts. The first is an account of a distance education class recently offered by a community college and one student's experiences with it. The second part of this paper attempts to analyze the student's account of his distance education experience. It further attempts to provide some evaluation of the successfulness or unsuccessfulness of the methods used in this form of distance education.

I. The Student's Account

Alex (name changed) was an adult student and a working professional who chose to take some community college classes. He was enrolled in an electronics program leading to an Associate's degree at the time he registered for his first distance education class. By this time, Alex had already earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree, and a degree in law at the local state university. He was thus a sophisticated student familiar with the university system and the demands that coursework ordinarily posed.

Alex elected to take a distance education course because he worked full-time and was unable to attend classes during the day. The distance education class for which he registered was Digital

Principles I, a course focusing on logic and computers. Because Alex had taken several courses in logic when he had earned his bachelor's degree ten years before, and because he was computer-literate, he believed he would not find Digital Principles I very difficult. To some extent, he took the class because he reasoned that the best way to introduce himself to distance education was to start with material with which he was already partially familiar.

Alex's instructor was the department chair of the electronics program at the community college. The community college offered some, but not many, distance education classes. It planned to expand further in that method of instructional delivery.

Alex described the class as follows: "When I signed up for the class, I met the instructor, who was the department chair, and he gave me in person the address on the internet where I could get the syllabus online. There was also a book for the class, which I bought at the school bookstore. The syllabus said there would be three exams, which I could sign up to take at any time in the school library, thirty homework assignments from the book, which I would send as snail-mail to the instructor, and three online conferences. The syllabus said I should try to do at least one homework assignment per week.

"A lot of things didn't go right. The 'online conferences' turned out to be pretty useless. What the instructor did was to post a very simple question to the students on a 'conference site.' The students would respond to the instructor and read one another's responses. All the student responses were very minimal. It didn't help me to read them. About all I learned was that the other students didn't seem very excited about the material. Also, the instructor only did two 'conferences' instead of three.

"The instructor also had online 'slide shows' which were supposed to be helpful. I didn't

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think they were. They were like lecture notes--a very stripped-down version of what was in the book. They weren't bad, but they weren't very useful either. I stopped reading them after a while.

"What was really bad was the homework assignments. The instructor gave us no help in doing them. We would read assigned pages in the textbook and then do the problems at the end of the chapter. I mailed my homework to the instructor, but he never sent any graded homework back, so I never knew what I was doing right or wrong. A couple of times I had questions about the homework that I emailed to the instructor. He sent back brief answers that didn't help me much. Sometimes he'd just tell me to look in the book at such-and-such a page. If I'd understood the book's explanation, I wouldn't have emailed him a question in the first place.

"Some of the assignments would take a very long time to do, although others were shorter. We were supposed to do about two assignments a week, but the syllabus only told us we should do 'at least one.' Halfway through the semester the instructor sent me an email to 'remind' me he wouldn't give any incompletes for the course. This was the first time I'd heard about this policy. It wasn't on the syllabus. I had assumed that, since it was a fifteen-week course and we had thirty assignments, we would be given incompletes if we needed them.

"There were other problems with the syllabus. It looked as if the instructor had just uploaded the syllabus he used when the class met in the regular way without changes. For example, the syllabus said that our grade would go down if we had more than four tardies or absences. How do you have a tardy or an absence for a distance education class? So the instructor obviously hadn't made some changes that he should have, and it was hard sometimes to know what I should pay attention to and what I should ignore.

"I had trouble getting to the school library to take the exams the way I was supposed to. The

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library was closed the first time I went because it was a holiday. Of course that was the only time I could take the exams without taking half a day off work. Since I'd been doing my lessons at home and hadn't been going to the college, I hadn't seen the signs posted about the library closing. I eventually had to take time off work to take the exams. Afterwards, the instructor didn't tell me what grade I'd made or what problems I'd missed. I had no feedback on what I'd done wrong. It was like dropping the exams into a black hole.

"It was also hard to keep on track. There wasn't any pressure to get a homework assignment done by a certain date. That was good in some ways, because sometimes I'd be too busy at work to get any homework done in the evenings. But I also think you need to be really disciplined to get homework done in the evenings if you know you can always put it off. That's the good thing about classes: you have to attend them two or three times a week and you have to have your reading done by then. It gives you structure, and you can't fall too far behind. Maybe I'm not very disciplined, because I kept falling behind in Digital Principles. Also, we were supposed to be graded on the homework assignments, but I don't know if the instructor even looked at them, since I never got them back.

"Some of the homework assignments were pretty short. They'd take an hour or two to do, and that was fair. But at least one took me a full day. It would get monotonous to sit and work through all the problems and then send them off and not get any word back on how well I'd done.

"I've taken correspondence courses before, and they were better structured than this class. With the correspondence classes, I would buy a guidebook with explanations and instructions at the same time I bought my text. I always had my assignments graded and sent back to me, even though sometimes it would take a while. In this class, I never got anything back, and I didn't have anything

besides the textbook to learn the material. The online conferences were worthless. Essentially I felt I was teaching myself the class material. Since digital principles is a very technical subject, I didn't always feel I was teaching myself very successfully.

"But the course did let me do my homework when I wanted to, as much as I wanted to, and I didn't have to commute to the college or sit through classes. That was what I wanted. Still, I don't think I learned the material as well as I should have."

II. Analysis

Alex was obviously a good candidate for distance education. Armed with a degree in law, a master's degree, and a bachelor's degree, he was highly familiar with the university system and with college classes. He was not unprepared for the amount of work required by the class nor its difficulty. It might even have been predicted Alex would sail through the class, given his genuine interest in the subject and his educational qualifications. Thus, Alex's growing disaffection and his sense that he was not learning the material as he had hoped and expected suggest serious flaws with the course.

Alex's problems fall under three headings. The first group is composed of those problems stemming from lack of feedback to the students. The second set of problems is associated with Alex's difficulty in completing his homework assignments with the regularity necessary to turn in on the average two assignments every week. The third group consists of the issues regarding the workload of homework assignments that a distance education student can be expected to carry.

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A. Feedback Problems

Alex's complaints point to one danger in distance education. Although the instructor can, in theory, respond to the students' questions quickly, he may choose not to do so. This may be by design (a deliberate encouragement that the student solve the problem without help) or by chance (the instructor puts off responding immediately and then forgets about the message). Or an instructor may respond but be too busy with other classes to write to a student in depth.

The latter is a genuine difficulty. Just as we write more slowly than we speak, so we can explain a solution verbally in much less time than it takes to write out a solution on email. Many instructors may choose to equalize the disparity by writing shorter explanations. These responses may be more concise, but it does not necessarily follow that they will be more efficient. The instructor may use similar language to that in the text in explaining the text, so that the student, whose problem was as much with the words as with the concept, remains as confused as before.

In turn, this leads to the problem that the student may not understand or properly benefit from the instructor's emailed explanation. In face-to-face classes, an instructor must often repeat the same material several times in different ways in order to make it clear. Under such circumstances, an instructor usually has some sense of how much repetition is necessary from student questions, student responses to the instructor's questions, or simply the facial expressions of the students. Just as Alex did not have the proper feedback from his instructor to understand how well he had learned the material, the instructor may not have had enough feedback from Alex to understand how well he had explained the material. The confusion may have been equally distributed across both sides of the electronic desk.

Thus, instructors teaching distance education classes may wish to take extra care to stay in

communication with their students. Time-consuming though it may be to write to each student individually to ask him about his progress with the material, without some close attention the instructor will be unable to ascertain how well the students are learning. And if the instructor does not know how well the students are learning--or not learning--he will be unable to provide any guidance for them.

B. Problems of Structure

Alex also experienced problems of structuring his time and staying on track with his homework assignments. He believed at first that the class was intended to allow a student to take a year to complete rather than a semester. When he realized his error, he found it difficult to catch up. He then experienced continual difficulties in sitting down to complete his assignments. Since the assignments could always be put off, it was easy for him to do so.

In some ways this problem is very easy to remedy. Distance education instructors may simply set more deadlines for students and explain their expectations clearly. Students who know they must get two assignments to the teacher at the end of every week will, presumably, steel themselves to the unpleasantness.

But Alex had chosen the distance education course in part because it allowed him a flexible structure. To cut back on the flexibility would have made Alex less interested in the course. Thus, distance education may find itself caught between Scylla and Charybdis: too much flexibility will decrease the likelihood of a student's finishing the class successfully, but too little flexibility will fail to attract students. An instructor must think carefully to strike the right balance between freedom and structure.

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C. Homework Load

It is also possible that Alex found himself doing more homework than he would have in a face-to-face class. At least one of his assignments took a full day to complete, quite apart from the reading which accompanied the assignment. Most community colleges do not require so much. The instructor may have reasoned that extra homework was necessary to compensate for the lack of face-to-face contact. Sensible though this may have been, Alex found the homework so extensive that he had difficulty completing all assignments. Fewer assignments would have made the class more in keeping with a student's reasonable expectations for allocating study time. Yet a teacher may just as reasonably believe that he cannot cut his lectures out of his syllabus without replacing them with extra work of some sort.

Both sides have good arguments. Nevertheless, Alex's experience suggests that distance education instructors should seriously consider the amount and type of homework assignments they give to their students. Replacing a lecture with a problem set covering the same material may seem intuitive, but it may cause students problems that the instructor did not anticipate.

III. Conclusion

Alex's experience with distance education was not necessarily typical. Yet some of his problems with the medium undoubtedly are those which other students will face in future. Distance education is an exciting new tool, but it must be carefully honed to accomplish the desired result of reaching out to new students and making education more easily available to existing students. Those individuals who construct distance education courses need to consider how to modify existing educational methods to best use the possibilities of the new medium. A good syllabus for a face-to-

face class does not automatically translate into a good syllabus for a distance education class. Instructors must think carefully about the kind of instruction they may feasibly deliver. Without such care, a distance education class can turn into a nightmare for the student: a class where he must teach himself a subject without the slightest sense of whether he is going in the right direction or the wrong one.

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